



# Florida Bay Map & Guide

## READING THE WATER

LEARN TO SEE THE BAY THE  
WAY LOCAL EXPERTS DO

## DISSECTING THE MAZE

THE BAY'S CHANNELS AND  
BASINS MAPPED AND RATED  
BY A TEAM OF EXPERTS.  
(Inside Spread)

## HOW DO YOUR SHALLOW WATER SKILLS MEASURE UP?

TAKE AN EASY TEST AND PICK  
UP SOME POINTERS FROM THE  
PROS. (back page)

## ISLAND BLUES

SEEING SPOONBILLS IS A TREAT  
FOR MOST ANGLERS. FIND  
OUT WHAT YOU CAN DO TO  
PROTECT THEM. (back page)

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## Reading Shallow Water

Some local guides will tell you about the time they got The Sight. Maybe it was after they fished 100 days in four months. Maybe it was after ten years traveling the same waters. Regardless what brought it on, one day they just started to see things they hadn't seen before, small details in the water, the fish, the winds, and the weather.

Everyone would like to be able to see like these locals. You can, if you're willing to spend hundreds of days on the water each year. Until you get that experience under your belt, you can use these tips to help you distinguish shallow water from deep.

**Polarized Glasses.** "To see like a local," advises veteran guide Mike Ehlers, "you need to use the same tools they do." You need to use your eyes and a great pair of polarized glasses, preferably with amber or vermilion lenses. "Reading the water is something your GPS can't do," adds 16-year veteran backcountry Park Ranger Dave Fowler. "Most of the people we find aground have a GPS and charts on board. It didn't keep them off the banks. They weren't using their eyes. They got stuck with a towboat bill and a ticket for hundreds of dollars. Worse than that, they tore up the bottom."

**The Color of Water.** If you want to graduate from novice to apprentice,

practice reading the color of the water. "There are dozens of subtle colors in the Bay", suggests water scientist Joe Boyer, who studies such things. White mullet mud. Tea-colored Glades run-off. But, for starters, shoals and banks are usually tan or brown. Deeper water is green or blue. Your polarized sunglasses should make the colors pop.

**Wading Birds.** "Birds aren't six feet tall," quips guide George Clark, Jr. If you see a bird stalking the flats, the water where it stands is less than a foot deep.

**Mangrove Seedlings.** These seedlings grow only on bank tops. The water around them is generally less than 6 inches deep - too shallow to run a boat.

**Near Flamingo.** The banks that stretch from Conchie Channel to the mouth of Tin Can Channel are easily lost in the muddy water carried by Flamingo's main tidal channel. Stray too far south towards Murray, Frank, or Palm Keys, and you'll find yourself aground. "Outside the channels," says guide Rusty Albury, "everything's shallow." The big rectangle formed by the mainland, Oxfoot Bank, and Whipray Basin is notoriously hard to navigate. Twelve inches of water can look like three feet and vice versa.

## Hit this guide before hitting the Bay

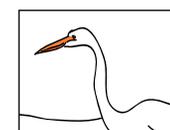
"There's no other place in the States where you can sight-fish for tarpon, bonefish, snook, and redfish," says Commodore Tad Burke of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association. But Burke is quick to add that, "it's not just about the fish. You can see spoonbills feeding on the flats and crocodiles up in the creeks. If you're lucky, you might see a flamingo or a sawfish."

While exploring Florida Bay can be a treat, it's not for the beginner. Shallow waters, snaking banks and tricky passes make the Bay a challenge even for experienced shallow water boaters.

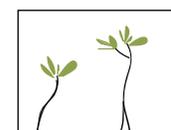
"Florida Bay is not a body of deep water with a ring of shore around it," advises flyfishing instructor and Bay veteran Sandy Moret. Instead, it is a few dozen basins (most less than five feet deep) separated from each other by banks where the water is only a few inches deep. Boaters can get from basin to basin by following passes and channels through the banks. Some of these passes are less than 16 inches deep in winter. And some of them twist and turn like a slalom course.

See "Hit This Guide" on back page

## Signs of Shallow Water



Birds Wading



Mangroves



Brown = Shoal



Green or Blue = Deep



Calm Patch in Chop

# Florida Bay

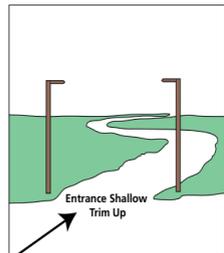
## Legend

-  **3-6 Feet Deep.** Recommended for boats 23 feet in length or less.
-  **Less than 3 Feet Deep.** Recommended for boats drafting less than 12 inches. Avoid stopping and starting - even shallow boats can "crater" the bottom when getting up on plane.
-  **Shoal or banktop.** These areas can be less than 1 foot deep. Poling or trolling motors recommended.
-  **Wilderness Entry.** Paddle-in only. Only boats with motor removed from transom allowed beyond these points.
-  **Wilderness.** Only boats with motor removed from transom allowed in these waters.
-  **Wildlife Management Area.** Closed to any and all entry. Formerly known as the "Crocodile Sanctuary".

## Passes & Channels

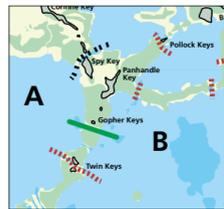
-  **Black**  
Very shallow, especially in winter. Can be 16 inches deep or less. Route is often very hard to read. Only shallow draft boats (1 foot or less) at all times. We recommend boater's use other routes in winter.
-  **Red**  
Some portions might be less than two feet deep and require tight turns. Extra care required to avoid damage to the bottom. Only shallow draft boats (1 foot or less).
-  **Green**  
Wide channels that are usually deep and easy to read. Good for beginners. Still, boats drafting more than 18 inches not recommended.

### Channel Mouth & Markers



Size up the channel from a safe distance. Stay on plane, but slow way down. Channels are shallowest at their entrances and exits, so trim your motor. Enter. If there are two stakes, stay between them. If there is only one stake, stay as close as possible to it. Arrows indicate the side of the stake where you should be.

### Choosing Routes



Use the deepest routes to get to where you're going. A boat could use two routes from A to B. The best would be the green channels SE of Panhandle and S of Gopher Keys. Don't run aground, take the long way around. It might cost you 5 minutes, but it will save you from tearing up the sea bottom.



Use as a companion to NOAA Chart 33E - Do not use for navigation - Use as a companion to NOAA Chart 33E - Do not use for navigation - Use as a companion to NOAA Chart 33E



From left: 1) Hard aground in 6 inches of water. 2) Flamingos near Flamingo. 3) Grounded boater and passengers push towards deeper water.

## Rate Your Skills in Shallow Water

Veteran Park Ranger Dave Fowler, a friendly, chat-over-the-back-fence kind of guy, has a simple grading system for the dozens of people he's taught to navigate the Bay. Clean white trail of prop wash and you pass. Brown in the prop wash and you fail. Pieces of cut grass in the prop wash and...don't ask. To graduates of Dave's boating course, brown in their boat's wake is like muddy boots on an expensive rug.

trim when you're idling in shallow water. At idle, you can tilt the engine up quite far. Just be sure to keep the water intake under water.

The best way to keep your trail clean is to stay out of areas too shallow for your boat. How can you judge if an area is too shallow? Can you come off plane and get back up without blowing a crater in the bottom? In general, even shallow draft boats need at least three

**Clean white trail of prop wash and you pass.**

Clean, white prop wash is the best indicator that you're running the Bay correctly. Follow these expert tips and you'll keep your trail clean.

Trim your motor up when running through channels and passes. "A small change in the engine's trim angle," says Fowler, "raises the propeller a few inches in the water and directs the blast away from the bottom." Don't tip the engine up so high that you lose the ability to steer.

You can – and should – also

feet of water to climb up on plane without stirring up a plume of mud.

### Island Blues

Jerry Lorenz has quit smoking. But, when his work gets stressful, he sometimes wants a cigarette. A few weeks ago, Lorenz watched a whole year's work go down the tubes. Today, as we ask him to recount the story, he looks like he needs a smoke.

What line of work is Lorenz in? His sun-reddened face

World-record fly-fisherman Billy Pate has his own scoring system for boat captains. He believes in courtesy on the water. Many fish and birds that haunt the flats are extremely skittish. Flats anglers and nature watchers often pole or paddle a few hundred yards to silently stalk them. If you get within a quarter mile, you can spook the animals and ruin the person's day. Stay well clear of any craft moving under hand-power on the flats and you'll pass Billy's test.

Outfitter Sandy Moret has one last piece of wisdom. "You shouldn't ask yourself – can I go? Instead ask – should I go? And if you don't know, don't go. It's that simple."

Give yourself time to learn the Bay. It won't happen in a weekend.

and scratchy drawl suggest "fishing guide". Though many of his friends are fly anglers, Lorenz is not a guide. Lorenz is a scientist. His line of work, and the cause of his stress, is roseate spoonbills.

In December and January, Jerry watched the Frank Key spoonbill colony - the second largest colony in Florida Bay - go bottoms up. In the Everglades,

### Hit This Guide...Cont.

Back in the 1880s, when maritime knowledge was transmitted by word of mouth, Florida Bay was known as "a body of water so shallow that even skilled boatmen had trouble navigating its treacherous shoals." Author and historian Stuart McIver recounts that most travelers to Flamingo avoided a route through the Bay. Instead, they stayed out in the Gulf until they reached the tidal channel between East Cape Sable and Flamingo.

Advances in technology like light, shallow-draft boats and the handheld GPS might seem like great antidotes to the hazards of the past. But the truth is that these tools often give boaters the confidence they need to get into serious trouble. There is

no escaping the physical realities of Florida Bay. And there is no substitute for good old-fashioned caution.

Most people who run aground in the Bay have a chart and a GPS on board. So, we decided maps and charts weren't enough. To get people safely in and out of the Bay, we need to give people tips from the experts. Think of this guide as a notebook that has been marked up for you by a roomful of guides, rangers, and Bay natives. Some of the contributors to this guide have been traveling the Bay for more than 40 years. This guide will help you read the water (front page). You'll also get some advice from the pros about running your boat safely in the Bay's shallows (back page). Inside, you'll find a detailed

map describing passes and shoals. When used correctly, as a supplement to - rather than a substitute for a chart - this map should keep you in water deep enough for your boat.

Staying in water deep enough for your boat is the key to protecting Florida Bay. More than 10,000 acres of prime habitat for shrimp, lobster, and game fish have been torn up by inexperienced boaters. Billy Pate, record-holding fly-angler, calls the Bay "more special than any of the 30-some odd countries I've fished." But without your help, the Bay will suffer.

Do your part, study up, and stay cautious. Tight lines and safe travels.

tips

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